

**CHINESE SNORT IN 'THE YEAR OF THE OX:
IS US WORRIED?**

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The Chinese began their lunar new year on 26 Jan 2009 with more than the usual fervour, celebrations and gaiety. They designated the current lunar year as 'the year of the Ox'. The Ox, an animal that is meant to symbolize prosperity and vigour through fortitude and solemn hard work, appears aptly symbolic for these difficult economic times, though the burden on the 'Ox' may have increased a wee bit.

The 'Ox' is also known to turn ferocious when angered, and makes its displeasure known by a loud and unmistakable 'snort', in the first instance. US was at the receiving end of the 'Ox's snort' when the US Navy surveillance ship, *Impeccable*, was allegedly harassed by Chinese vessels on 08 Mar 2009, while operating about 75 miles south of Hainan Island, as the Chinese claimed that the ship was carrying out illegal surveys in their Exclusive Economic Zone. Details of the incident are covered later in the paper.

However, the immediate question that comes to mind is - "From where have the Chinese derived the strength to challenge the US might in the Pacific Ocean (though it is closer home) and ensure that US takes good note of it too?"

The answer lies in the fact that China has been consolidating its Comprehensive National Power (CNP) for last two decades through leapfrogging development in the fields of economy, technology, agriculture, industrial production and defence modernisation. A process set in motion in late seventies and early eighties by Deng Xiaoping, the charismatic leader with comparatively liberal mindset and moderate approach, as opposed to the other Communist Party predecessors and contemporaries, started paying rich dividends by turn of the 21st Century. The decision by subsequent Chinese leadership, of embracing the typical capitalistic model of economic development,

albeit with Chinese characteristics, has more than ensured that Chinese economy has continued to grow in double digits during the last decade.

China is the fourth largest Economy of the world today, with a GDP of more than \$ 3 trillion and foreign exchange reserve of more than \$ 2 trillion at the end of 2008, notwithstanding the global economic meltdown. This is ample evidence of the success of the policies and plans relentlessly followed by successive Communist Party leadership. The tremendous economic growth that China has achieved in the recent past has provided it with financial security, considerable flexibility, options, and the fiscal wherewithal to invest in the critical and core areas which are essential, if it aims at becoming a global superpower. These critical and core areas have included development and acquisition of advanced technologies, creation of advanced educational infrastructure and establishment of R & D facilities.

The advanced technologies in the modern world form the bed-rock for initiation and implementation of core nation-building activities, as the Chinese have amply demonstrated in some fields mentioned below:

- Commissioning of mega infrastructure engineering projects like railways, roads, ports, airports, dams, hydro-electric projects, Pipelines etc., for social development and further economic progress.
- Achieving space based capabilities which include Rocket and Satellite sciences, Lunar missions, ASAT technologies etc., all supported by tracking, telemetry and launch sites.
- Creating and maintaining nuclear power infrastructure.
- Above all, providing the necessary high technology military hardware and informationisation infrastructure for the Chinese Defence Forces, which have been undergoing rapid modernisation during the last couple of decades.

It is precisely the last 'Nation building' activity of the Chinese i.e. the manifestation of the growing Chinese 'Comprehensive National Power' into 'fast paced military modernisation', that is causing tremendous concern and anxiety to the world, particularly the US. While the US maintains that the international community has limited knowledge of Chinese motivations, decision-making and

key capabilities supporting PLA modernisation¹, China has claimed that it will persist in taking the road of peaceful development, and that it will never seek hegemony or engage in military expansion².

The lack of transparency is all the more alarming because of considerable growth in successive Chinese defense budgets. The dramatic increase in Chinese defense spending over the past 30 years is striking. While the first decade saw an average 3.5 percent rise in the defense budget, the figure rose to an average increase of 14.5 percent in the second, and to 15.9 percent in the last decade. China's proposed military spending in 2009 will also increase by nearly 15 percent, to \$70 billion from \$ 57.2 Billion in 2008³. China of course, maintains that its defense budget grew slower than its GDP growth rate and is only about 1.4 % of its GDP. Though it justified its soaring military expenses on account of increase in military manpower maintenance costs as well as the runaway inflation, it is more realistic to assume, however, that the increase in China's defense budget in recent years is due to qualitative changes made under the country's shifting military strategy.

Considerable doctrinal change has come about in the stance of Chinese Armed Forces as a consequence of the above mentioned newly found strength and capability building process undertaken by them, duly backed by adequate financial and political support. Today, PLA seeks to carry out counter-terrorism, stability maintenance, emergency rescue and international peace keeping tasks, as opposed to largely defensive and internal roles assigned to it earlier. China now thinks much beyond Taiwan in terms of its transforming military strategy. It takes military operations other than war (MOOTW) as an important form of applying military force⁴. PLA Navy, on its part has also been striving to comprehensively improve its capabilities of integrated offshore operations, strategic deterrence and counter-attacks, gradually develop its capabilities for conducting operations in distant waters and countering non-traditional security threats⁵. This is manifest in increased PLA Navy activities in East and South China seas, increasing number of forays in mid Pacific till the second island chain, sailing its warships right across Tsugaru Straits between the two Japanese islands, participating in the recently concluded multilateral maritime exercise 'Aman 09' hosted by Pakistan in Mar 09 and the ongoing anti piracy patrols in Indian Ocean, to name a few.

Should the US Worry?

It is well known that Sino-US defence relations have always been tenuous, though outwardly both the countries have been trying to maintain a façade of normalcy. The increased confidence level of PLA ships while interacting with US warships at sea in Pacific Ocean, as also

stronger stand taken by them vis-à-vis passage and operation of US and other countries' warships in South and East China seas, tells a lot about their changed 'Force Projection' mindset. Recent Chinese activities that have positively ruffled the American feathers are mentioned below:-

- A Chinese 'Song' class submarine penetrated the US Carrier battle group's screen and surfaced close to the US Aircraft Carrier Kitty Hawk in Oct 06, well within the firing range of its torpedoes. The incident caused widespread consternation in US Navy and embarrassed the US leadership which had been trying hard to improve defence relations between the two countries.
- China did not accord permission to the US aircraft Carrier Kitty Hawk to berth at Hong Kong for R&R in Nov 07, despite prior in-principle consent.
- China suspended the ongoing defence co-operative mechanism with US in Oct 08, after US announced a \$ 6.2 billion Arms package for Taiwan.

The US on its part, has also kept the pot simmering with the following incidents that have caused China to protest vehemently:-

- It conferred the 'Congressional Medal of Honour' on Dalai Lama on 17 Oct 07, the highest civilian award of the country. Further, Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of US House of representatives, met Dalai Lama Post Mar 08 Tibetan unrest and criticised China for their crack down on Tibetans, and its Anti-Tibetan policies.
- The US administration proposed to sell \$ 6.43 billion worth of Arms to Taiwan in Oct 08, which led to China suspend all the ongoing defence co-operation activities with US.
- The US released a 'Human Rights Report' on 25 Feb 09, in which it castigated China for a poor human rights record. The report was released just three days after 'successful' visit of Secretary Hillary Clinton to China, where she had refrained from raising any human rights issues. China in response, issued its own 'Human rights Report for US' soon after, advising the US to address its own human rights problems first.

- The US House of Representatives passed a near unanimous resolution on 11 Mar 09 asking China to ‘end repression in Tibet and lift the harsh policies imposed on Tibetans immediately’, despite Chinese protests against the bill. The bill also called on China to resume dialogue with the Dalai Lama.

In furtherance of their continuing bilateral friction to keep each other off balance and guessing, as is evident from the recent activities mentioned above, came the latest ‘*Impeccable incident*’ on 08 Mar 09. China lodged an official protest against the U.S. Navy over the ship’s unauthorised activities in its Exclusive Economic Zone. China alleged that the US ship was not a research vessel, but a spy ship, which was conducting illegal surveys designed to track the movement of the Chinese submarines that operate from the South China Sea Naval base off Hainan. The U.S. too protested about the incident, alleging that the Chinese vessels engaged in dangerous manoeuvres when shadowing the US Navy surveillance vessel *Impeccable* and moved directly in front of the ship, forcing her to take emergency action to avoid a collision. The US alleged that China had violated international law by taking aggressive action against the ship in international waters.

China rejected the US account and demanded that it cease its illegal activities in the South China Sea. The Chinese maintained that the area was part of its Exclusive Economic Zone. On its part, the US insisted the area was part of international waters and that US ships had a legal right to operate there. It further reiterated that the American naval ships would continue to operate in such international waters. The US Navy decided to henceforth provide Destroyer escorts to its surveillance ships operating in the South China Sea. A day after the incident, the US Destroyer *Chung-Hoon* accompanied the *Impeccable*. Thereafter, no further incidents of harassment from Chinese boats or aircrafts occurred.

U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton and Chinese Foreign Minister, Yang Jiechi discussed the dispute during wide-ranging talks on 11 Mar 09 in Washington. Both countries announced that they have agreed to work hard to avoid such stand off incidents that would raise tensions between the two countries.

The fact that the whole incident occurred so soon after the much touted Sino-US Defence dialogue re-commenced in Feb 09 after a five month suspension, is again indicative of deep mistrust between the two countries. This incident also underscores the propensity of each side to rile each other by playing subtle games of brinkmanship. However, such stand offs have great scope for escalation⁶, given that the opposing parties try to outscore and outdo each other in an environment of

suspicion and in the absence of clear rules of engagement. A slight indiscretion on the part of either party may cause a major international incident, with consequences undesirable by both parties.

The Sino-US military hotline between the two Defence ministers was established in Apr 08, to precisely prevent any bilateral situation arising out of incidents, such as that mentioned above, to escalate to beyond a point of no return. However, the hotline appears to have gone 'cold', as both sides felt that the line would come in handy only to defuse a major Cross-straits crisis. On the ground though, there are reports of an initiative being worked out between US PACOM and the PLA Navy, to lay down the 'Rules of Business' when the forces of each other's country meet at sea, so as to avoid misunderstandings and ensure that the incidents like the *Impeccable* do not lead to unforeseen escalations.

The US is also apprehensive about the Chinese efforts to develop anti-access and Area denial capabilities, to deter or counter third party intervention in any future cross straits crisis. Of particular concern is the reported Chinese development of terminally guided precision 'Anti Ship Ballistic Missiles' to target US Aircraft Carriers and thus hold the US forces beyond the second Island chain, providing China with preemptive and coercive options during a regional crisis⁷. This supposedly acquired Anti access and Area denial capability, coupled with other modernisation efforts of PLA Navy have given adequate confidence level to China, to flex its maritime muscle closer to its coast, if not farther out in Pacific. US fears that the increasing maritime reach of Chinese Navy in Pacific Ocean will ultimately lead to constriction of free and unchecked operating space for its own forces. US will surely find it hard to come to terms with such a scenario.

In conclusion, it would be more than prudent to presume that the last word in the tenuous Sino-US mind games have not been spoken, and the series of incidents between the two countries that occur occasionally have not come to an end, despite all the confidence building measures and economic interdependencies between them. The world should wait and watch for the next pinprick and the two countries should prepare themselves for springing more surprises on each other and subsequently countering them. The possible difference in each of the successive episodes would be that the quantum of Chinese surprise would progressively increase, and so would its response to US initiated surprises. **So, the US better be worried.**

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¹ US DOD Report 2008 on *Military power of China*, p-01

² White Paper on 'China's National Defense in 2008'

³ www.english.chinamil.com.cn accessed on 2009-03-05

⁴ n.2.

⁵ ibid

⁶ The past incidents between the two countries have however not escalated into anything substantial, as invariably, either China or US decided not to proceed with the next escalatory step, thus defusing the tension.

⁷ US DOD Report 2009 on *Military power of China*, p-21

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